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# Grandma's Hands

## *An Open Letter to My Grandmother "Mother"*

*It is estimated that 52 percent of African American grandmothers in the United States who live with their grandchildren are their grandchildren's primary caregivers ("Did You Know?", 2004). Reflecting upon her life as an African American girl/woman raised by a grandmother, the author addresses an open letter to her. The writer pays homage to her grandmother while recollecting a wealth of experiences and special memories of time spent with her grandmother "mother."*

Grandma's hands  
Clapped in church on Sunday morning  
Grandma's hands  
Played the tambourine so well  
Grandma's hands  
Used to issue out a warning  
She'd say "Gladys don't you run so fast,"  
Might fall on a piece of glass,  
Might be snakes there in that grass,  
Grandma's hands... (Withers, 2001)

The African American Grandmother has been variously described as the guardian of the generation: The preserver of extended families, the keeper and sharer of history, wisdom, and folk beliefs, the source and communicators of values and ideals and the protector of grandchildren. (Gibson, 2002: 36)

Reflecting upon my life I have composed an open letter to my grandmother. It recounts my experiences being raised as her child. While I maintained regular

contact with my mother, my grandmother, affectionately referred to as MaMa (pronounced Mah Mah), was my primary caregiver or my grandmother “mother.” This recollection also includes memories of my great-grandmother, MaMa’s mother, of whom I am vividly reminded by the relationship MaMa now has with my own daughters.

Dear MaMa,

As I sit here trying to write of my experiences growing up with you I often find myself moved to tears. I have so many memories, so many feelings, so many fears. I’m not quite sure where to start. I guess I will just start at the beginning.

When I think of my life with you I think of not only love but also triumph and security. Triumph because we both triumphed over many adversities together by holding on to one another. Security because, plain and simple, that’s what you provided me. I often thought as a young child what would happen to me if something happened to you. Where would I go? Who would care for me? Who could ever love me as you do? I still find myself, after 36 years of living, asking myself the same questions.

We have shared so much together. My memories are full of my life with you. As a young child I don’t remember much but I created these memories from all the stories you shared with me (and everyone else) of my early years on this earth. I seem to find it difficult to separate my recollections from yours: taking my first steps in your home, walking around the corner and looking up to see your smile and open arms celebrating my accomplishment; my first time reading the word “exit” to you on one of our many shopping trips in Chicago. I do remember the many nights you bathed and carried me, giggling to your bed then preparing our night-time ritual of eating chopped fruit and watching Johnny Carson. I remember the patience you had with me when I reminded you to “s-t-o-p” while driving because I had just learned to read the word. I have to remind myself of the patience you had with me as my young daughters now do the very same thing.

I saw you as perfect as I did your mother, my great grandma. My young eyes saw you as beautiful. I remember you getting ready for church and admiring your perfection: your hair, your nails, your clothes, you. Remembering your hands they were always soft, well manicured, carrying a cute pocketbook and sometimes carrying me. Your hands hid all the hard work and hard times you had gone through and still were going through while raising me. My child’s mind could not comprehend how difficult it was to raise a child a second time around, especially, while working full time and sometimes, as well, part time jobs. You made it seem easy, normal. Perhaps that was because you felt it was something I did not need to be concerned with. You realized “It shouldn’t be hard to be a child” and you made sure that it wasn’t for me. (Kimbrow, 2003: 95)

Grandma's hands  
Used to ache sometimes and swell  
Grandma's hands ...

When I watch you with my girls, I'm reminded of the treasured relationship I had with Grandma, your mother and my great-grandmother. Grandma was my first connection to my history, my roots, and my existence as a person of African descent. My time spent with her was like a quiet history lesson (she was such a quiet natured woman—when she wanted to be). Some of my most treasured memories are the times I spent with her cooking. Cooking, as in most African American families, was definitely a grandmother (in my case great grandmother)- granddaughter bonding ritual. I absolutely loved it! She taught me the recipes of her childhood and as a result exposed me to cultures and traditions that, until adulthood, I thought were uniquely hers. I thought praline or “py-rine” candy and “cha cha” (chow chow) relish were delectables that she alone created, until I met other African Americans who were familiar with these foods.

I hold in my memory the instruction she gave me on quilting: how to make blocks and how to sew them together and how to tack. I still have my quilt that grandma made for my seventh birthday. I believe that was a part of her contribution to this world, her quilting. Her affliction with polio made working a traditional job physically impossible so she used what she knew to contribute what she could. Her quilts were not fancy; in fact they were particularly functional. Just the same every one delighted when she presented them with a quilt for a birthday or the arrival of a new baby. And she was filled with joy and pride to create them and give them away. I am just as delighted when I hold mine now as I remember being at seven when I received it. Holding it brings me a sense of comfort and peace. I feel grandma is near me then.

But you know MaMa, what I remember most about Grandma was her hands. I remember she used to always say to me “You're gonna miss these old hands one day.” That always sent a little shudder through me. It still does because her words are so true. I do miss her hands. Those hands that held me on her lap when I cried because I hurt. Those hands that gently plaited my hair and scratched my scalp (our therapeutic ritual that we shared since she allowed me to plait and scratch her scalp also. I suppose this was her way of teaching me to braid hair.) Those hands shelling peas quietly for hours on end on her front porch or the porch of her sisters in Mississippi. Those hands, tough from picking up hot cast iron skillets and gripping those old wooden crutches she relied on for all of her life. Those hands whose thumbs twiddled hours upon hours when she sat beside her front door window during the last years of her life. Those hands achy, swelling and sore as cancer spread through her body. Those hands tough as she was, yet, soft as she was.

Her stories and experiences are still with me to this day. She is still with me to this day. I talk to her. She answers me.

Grandma's hands  
Used to hand me a piece of candy  
Grandma's hands  
Picked me up each time I fell  
Grandma's hands...

I know there were challenging times: a woman in midlife raising a girl trying to become a woman. My teenaged years were difficult for me so I know they were difficult for you. With age comes wisdom, and questions. Questions I was afraid to ask and questions I assume you were not able to answer. Questions like "Am I ever a burden to you?" "What are your dreams?" "Did you have to sacrifice them for your children or me?"

I know my typical teenaged behaviour was challenging for you to go through a second time with a granddaughter. Times had changed. You were in your mid 30s when your daughters were teenagers. You were at "mid life" and at an age when a woman expects to be through with such emotions and battles that usually accompany a teenager during your second round of parenting with me. I know it wasn't easy to hear me blasting my beloved Prince music repeatedly. I remember you almost yelling over the music to talk to me. I never realized how much discomfort this caused you after working all day. You shared with me recently that my music would really "get on [your] nerves" until one day a little voice inside you reminded you to "Let that girl enjoy her music. It makes her happy." After that you said you decided to spend time outside after work and give me space inside to listen to music. "All of my frustrations went away after that," you said.

During all of the milestones, the challenges, the accomplishments I have had, you have been there with me. My graduation from elementary school, high school, undergraduate and then graduate schools. My moving out my sophomore year of college and you not once letting on that this rite of passage was just as difficult for you as it was for me until after I was settled into my new environment (I suppose you did not want me to feel guilty for moving). Wherever I have gone in my life you have been there and where ever I go I know you will be there. When I called to tell you I was pregnant with my first child, you approached me and acknowledged me as a woman yet guided and directed me with the wisdom and tenderness an elder shows to the inexperienced. You told me that if I kept my baby you would help me every step of the way and you have. I would have been lost if you hadn't been there to show me how to bathe the baby, console her when she was crying, how to eat properly so I could continue to breastfeed and stay healthy, how to survive teething, ear infections, fevers and my own case of new mother stress and jitters. And you did the same thing for me when I had my second daughter.

Naturally, we have had our share of childrearing disagreements, where I needed to establish my authority and place as an adult rather than a child. As well I had to recognize your place as matriarch and the wisdom carrier and learn

to step back, learn what I needed to know and adapt your lessons to fit my individual circumstances.

Motherhood made me recognize that your role of protector did not end once I reached adulthood. In fact, I don't think it will ever end. It will most certainly change and hopefully I will be able to be your protector if or when necessary. But I know you will always be my source of security. In you I know, that I will always have someone who "has my back" and who will believe me if no one else will (I think of how you stand up for me now as I struggle with panic disorder and accompanying phobias. You may not fully understand what I am experiencing but you are supporting me without question).

I imagine this time of life must be a bit frightening for you as it is for me. It is now time for me to be your protector, for us to watch over one another. I want you to know the same security that I have felt all my life. I want you to know you will not be alone as long as I am around which is the same thing you made sure I knew as a child. I want to be strong when you can't. You have been strong all your life, out of necessity I am sure. You were strong enough to leave school in the tenth grade to provide support for your mother and sisters. And, you were strong enough to rebuild your life and the lives of your daughters after leaving an abusive marriage. Strong enough to quietly assume the role of single grandmother "mother" to me after raising two daughters of your own. Strong enough to go every Saturday to your daughter's home to help her with her young children while still raising me. Strong enough to work everyday, pick me up from school, take me to music lessons and relentlessly care for your mother in the last years of her life. Strong enough to bear the death of both your sisters on the same day. Strong enough to board a Greyhound Bus and travel more than 700 miles to come and help me with my children at age 78.

As I grow older I realize the struggles that aging produces within our society. I see how difficult it is to be taken seriously at times and to be given the respect that has most certainly been earned as a result of the trial and errors of living. I acknowledge the concern and, I imagine, fear of possible illness and the affordability of health care. And I am outraged at how expensive it is to age, the expense usually falling on the one who is aging of course. I sometimes worry about whether I will be able to hold up my end of responsibility for our taking care of one another. You have done your job, now I want to make sure I adequately do mine. I question if I will ever be half the woman you have been and are now and I wonder how many trial and error life lessons will I have to experience to get to where you are now.

But despite all my questioning and self-doubt, there is one thing I am certain. I am certain that you can rest and be assured that "*Until the end of time, I'll be there for you*" (Prince, 1987). We will triumph over any adversity together and through our strength we will make it by holding on to one another. Life is a circle with no beginning and no end, just a continuation of our love for one another.

## **References**

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